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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post-conflict peace-building

Statement submitted by Mothers' Union, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 25 July 1996.

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Introduction

The Mothers' Union is an Anglican voluntary organisation promoting the well being of families throughout the world. Our three million members, the majority of whom are women, are actively engaged in a variety of initiatives within their own communities. In particular our *Family Life* and *Literacy and Development* programmes allow for a dynamic process of cradle to grave empowerment of women by women. Empowerment is an essential tool for achieving equal participation by women in the peace process.

The role of women

Women already execute a pivotal role in conflict resolution and peace building. Women are both social and political actors in their families and communities during and post conflict. Some of the broad range of responsibilities they assume include: income, food, children, sick relatives and orphans. Historically, it is women who have been willing to reach across divisive barriers in order to rehabilitate and reconstruct daily lives and needs.

However, women's active participation has been undervalued and dismissed in public and political spheres traditionally dominated by men. Women face many varied obstacles in their quest to build a more just and equitable society that will in turn lead to a more peaceful future, including, cultural stereotypes, discrimination, poverty and illiteracy.

Guiding principles

Women's equal participation in conflict prevention, management and conflict resolution and in post conflict peace building will only be achieved if a holistic approach is adopted. The approach detailed in UN Resolution 1325 will not independently secure parity for women. UN Resolution 1325 needs to be incorporated into an already existing framework of community action; sustainable peace cannot be imposed from the outside.

Efforts to involve women at the highest national political levels must start at the grassroots. Strategies and initiatives must primarily target women and men in their communities so that gender inequalities in the prevailing culture can be addressed. A transformative approach must be employed so that the underlying causes of women's unequal access to social, economic, political and public structures can be tackled. Involving women in the formal structures of a national peace process, using UN Resolution 1325 and other international legal instruments, will be more effective and sustainable in the long term following this dual approach.

Redefining 'Political'

The concept of the term 'political' has historically been understood as engagement with formal political institutions. However, a new understanding of 'political' must be sought that includes the work primarily carried out by women. Women are very active and engaged at the grassroots level of societies, working within and across communities to create positive change. This work is indeed 'political' and needs to be accredited as an integral and formal part of the political process.

Women develop relationships, build bridges and organise activity across political, religious, and ethnic boundaries. Women organise campaigns, demonstrations, lobby groups, teach, learn, share experiences and build community trust. Women enable change to take place at the national level by transforming communities and their cultures.

- Governments need to recognise women's role in society. By addressing local needs, women help to shape and develop their communities.
- UN agencies and donors must formally invest in women's organisations as a strategy for conflict prevention, resolution and peace building.

- UN peace initiatives and operations must improve and expand collaboration with existing women's groups to bring them formally into the peace process.

Achieving Equal Participation

Women remain extensively under represented in positions of power and decision making at national and international levels. They need equal social, political and legal rights in order to contribute to national governance and formal peace processes.

International targets for securing the representation of women in state institutions face two sets of major obstacles:

- At the government level there is a lack of financial resources, gender awareness and political will.
- The prevailing culture and societal norms regarding the role of women present barriers at a local level.

Gender Mainstreaming – Formal Representation

Quotas and ratios are often used as a mechanism for recruiting women in to the political process. Increasingly, in post conflict situations new constitutions and governments specify a minimum target of women representatives in institutions. However, raising numbers of women in political systems does not guarantee genuine change. The reasons can be three-fold: promotion but lack of decision-making authority, women being suppressed in their positions and women not seeking to advance their own gender's rights.

Governments need to:

- Create effective structures, instruments and resources to enact and enforce quotas, as in the case of Rwanda
- Take positive steps to endorse women
- Promote the active and full participation of women
- Monitor the opportunities and roles women are undertaking
- Assess the effectiveness of measures in order to make progress

UN peace operations need to:

- Ensure gender issues are a priority in all peace keeping activities
- Implement gender equality in all peace processes, agreements and transitional governments
- Ensure gender issues and training are integral to all UN units and teams and do not continue to be isolated from mainstream peace keeping.

Gender Mainstreaming – Culture and Education

To tackle cultural attitudes towards women's role in the public and political sphere, governments must acknowledge the many and varied roles that women assume throughout their lives. International institutions and states must:

- Recognise that real societal change must begin at family and community level
- Attribute political value to the work of women
- Encourage community and religious leaders to facilitate and promote the work of women

Providing education is the single most important action in achieving gender equality, preventing conflict and building peace post conflict. Education is the vehicle which enables societal change to occur. Education empowers women with the confidence and knowledge to cultivate their own advancement and mobilize change in the private, public and political arenas.

- States, with the support of the international community, must intensify efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of removing gender disparities in primary and secondary education.

Through participatory education programmes, such as the Mothers' Union Literacy and Development Programme, participants learn about their rights and community issues as they acquire literacy skills. Men and

women can discuss issues together and learn to understand each other. Men realize that women have a voice, women realise they have the right to a view, to express it and to be heard equally.

Building Capacity

Although women are very active and influential at grassroots levels in conflict resolution they continue to be excluded from formal peace negotiations. In Northern Ireland only formal political parties were recognised in peace negotiations, therefore women formed their own non-sectarian political party. This is a giant step for women and for others to follow suit they need to be empowered and enabled with information and support. Governments and UN agencies need to:

- Ensure women are informed and educated about their rights
- Provide education and training in literacy, leadership and negotiation skills
- Support women in accessing decision makers and articulating their visions and needs
- Allocate resources to enable women to develop and expand training programmes

The Mothers' Union in Burundi organises regional peace and reconciliation workshops to give individuals the skills to engage with the peace process. As well as being able to serve their own communities these women then share their skills with others.

Conclusion

It is vital that women who have lived with conflict and will continue to build peace once UN troops have left feel they have invested in, and can develop, the peace process. Whilst responsibility for political reconstruction rests with national authorities, the sustainability of the peace process in many ways depends on the involvement of women and communities.

Post conflict, imposing military and economic structures alone will not rebuild a nation. There needs to be a shift in policy in conflict situations from a military focus on security to one that includes integrated human development. Nation building must assume a participatory and holistic approach to counter accusations that Resolution 1325 is just rhetoric.